

Testimony

The Senate Agriculture Committee

Senate Bill 996

May 24, 2012



National Wolfwatcher Coalition
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My name is Nancy Warren. I live in Ewen where a wolf pack has used our property for the past fifteen years. I am also the Great Lakes Regional Director for the National Wolfwatcher Coalition. We are an all-volunteer nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting positive attitudes about wolves through education. We recognize the importance of the wolf to the natural balance of nature and we appreciate the ecological importance of this keystone predator.

The National Wolfwatcher Coalition believes Senate Bill 996 is inconsistent with the approved 2008 Wolf Management Plan and we oppose its passage.

It is not clear which version of the bill is the subject of this hearing. The Legislative website reflects a version that was referred to Committee on 3/1/2012. After learning of this hearing Tuesday morning, I contacted Senator Casperson's office and was sent a substitute version of the bill. Then, then very late Tuesday afternoon I was sent another version with a note that it was likely to be introduced. We also question why the DNR Wolf Biologist was not invited to participate in this hearing. We ask that the Committee delay action on SB 996 to allow those with a strong stake in wolf management issues time to prepare and submit comments on the correct version of the bill being considered.

The Michigan Wolf Management Plan is regarded as one of the best in the nation as it strikes a balance between protecting wolves and resolving conflicts. With delisting, the MI DNR has now implemented the plan which allows for lethal control of problem wolves, including landowner permits. The plan was developed through a process that included involvement of affected stakeholder groups and the general public along with the evaluation of peer-reviewed, scientific data.

Senate Bill 996 is unnecessary as Michigan law currently requires the State to compensate livestock owners for verified livestock killed by wolves, coyotes, and cougar regardless of

the extent to which efforts have been made to reduce depredation risks. The amount of compensation paid to the producer who suffers a loss from any of these predators is determined by the Michigan Department of Agriculture based on time of loss.

We do not support compensation for missing livestock. Further, we strongly oppose the weak documentation required as outlined in Senate Bill 996 which states, "If the claim for indemnification includes indemnification for missing animals pursuant to subsection (1), a notarized statement from the owner is sufficient documentation that 1 or more animals are missing and eligible for indemnification."

Livestock, domestic animals and pets die for many unexplained reasons other than predatory depredation and they can and do go missing for reasons other than wolves, cougar and coyotes. Some missing livestock even return home, unharmed. Yet, Senate Bill 996 allows for compensation for missing animals with a mere statement, without even requiring that a prior verified depredation had taken place.

Senate Bill 996 is unclear regarding the verification process and implies that the owner makes his own determination, verifies his own loss and isn't even required to submit photos to support the claim. I personally have had extensive training to identify tracks; still it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish a wolf track from a large dog, especially absent of straddle, stride measurements or in poor conditions. It is a giant leap from finding a presumed wolf track in a field and concluding a wolf was responsible for a depredation or missing livestock.

Predators often consume animals that die of natural causes without actually being responsible for their death. Larger raptors (great-horned owl, red-tail hawk, bald eagle) have also been known to kill livestock and pets as well. Eagles have been documented killing lambs and there has even been an occurrence of raven causing problems with new born lamb calves. Therefore, it is critical that a trained specialist investigate any depredation alleged to have been caused by wolves, coyotes or cougar. It is equally critical that as part of the verification process the owner must allow access to the property if they wish to claim indemnification.

Although a version of Senate Bill 996 removes the provision to reimburse pet owners, for the record, we wish to state that the National Wolfwatcher Coalition does not support compensation for dogs or cats injured or killed by wolves. The lack of State compensation for wolf depredation of dogs is consistent with the public preference on this issue (Beyer et al. 2006). No matter how well trained, pets left outside unsupervised face many risks including being hit by a car or being injured / killed by any number of wild animals such as porcupine, bear, deer, bobcat, coyote or wolf. Bobcat, raccoon and fisher are known predators of cats. Many injuries / death to pets could be avoided by the owner taking precautionary measures.

Senate Bill 996 does not require that a dog or cat be killed on private property or under the immediate control or direct supervision of the owner to receive compensation. While

Senate Bill 996 excludes payment for dogs injured or killed during a hunt, how will it be determined if the dog was hunting, and thereby not eligible for compensation or out for a walk with its owner “scouting” and thereby eligible for compensation? SB 996 does not address compensation for dogs killed or injured during training periods leading up to the hunt and the bill insinuates that the owner of an injured animal would still be reimbursed the fair market value of the injured animal not just the veterinarian costs incurred for treating the animal.

Simply put, why should there be compensation to a pet owner for wolves when none exists if a bear, porcupine, eagle or bobcat injures or kills the pet?

Two other components of Senate Bill 996 are troublesome:

- With budget cuts, staff shortages and multi-agency involvement, it is unreasonable to expect that an indemnification payment be made within 30 days. The timeframe must include adequate time to conduct an investigation, perhaps a site visit, consultation with the owner regarding the value of the animal, creation of a 1099 form and the issuance of the check. There are times when a DNA analysis may be required as well.
- Given the current privacy laws, the department is not in a position to determine if the producer received or is expected to receive compensation from any other source prior to making a depredation payment.

Any legislation must be based on facts not emotion or fears and must not be a drain on taxpayers. This bill is not necessary. It will cost the state money we do not have and creates an atmosphere for fraud and deception at taxpayer expense.

We ask that Senate Bill 996 not advance. Instead, please allow MI DNR to fully implement the Wolf Management Plan without legislative intrusion.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

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